The Destroyed 'Utopian' Zoo

De Helder Araújo

High above the golden stones of Jerusalem, the zoo was a mosaic of iron bars and ancient dust. Sela, a massive crocodile with skin like cracked river mud, sat motionless in his pool. Most called him a monster, but the foxes in the neighboring enclosure watched him with curious eyes. Navon, a fox with a sharp mind and silver-tipped fur, often sat by the fence, sensing a quiet sadness in the great reptile that the humans ignored.

The peace shattered when a stray hyena, having dug its way into the reptile exhibit, lunged at Sela while he basked. Akiva, a young and impulsive fox, squeezed through a gap in the wire to intervene. He didn't see a predator; he saw a neighbor in need. Akiva barked and nipped at the hyena’s heels, distracting it just long enough for Sela to slide toward the water, but the hyena’s jaws were faster than the fox’s retreat.

By the time the zookeepers arrived, Akiva was gone. The humans, seeing the bloody scene and the agitated crocodile, assumed Sela was the killer. They pointed their long, tranquilizer rifles at the crocodile, shouting about "dangerous beasts" and "rogue predators." Sela retreated into the shadows of his concrete cave, confused and mourning the little fox who had died to save him.

Navon stood atop a limestone rock, his voice ringing out to the gathered foxes. "They call Sela a monster because it is easier than understanding him!" he cried. "Akiva knew the truth—that no animal is born evil. It is the cages that make us cruel, and the humans who define our nature." The foxes cheered, their orange coats a sea of fire in the twilight, as Navon began to weave a dream of a world without locks.

The revolution was swift and silent. Using skills honed by years of watching the keepers, the foxes swiped the heavy ring of keys from a sleeping guard's belt. Navon stood beside Lavi, a massive lion, as they turned the key in the great cat's gate. "Today," Navon whispered, "the labels of 'predator' and 'prey' die. Today, we are all simply brothers of the earth."

Navon was declared the "Liberator King." He moved into the zookeeper's office and drafted the Great Code. It forbade "bestialization"—the act of treating any animal as a mere beast of burden or a mindless killer. "We shall think, we shall love, and we shall rise above our instincts," Navon proclaimed to an owl named Sage, who helped him scribe the laws onto the office walls.

But the "Utopia" was heavy. A leopard named Pard tried to walk alongside a gazelle, but the scent of the gazelle's fear made his stomach ache with a guilt he couldn't name. To feel a natural urge was now a "sin" against the Code. Animals walked with hunched shoulders and downcast eyes, terrified that a growl or a pounce would mark them as "un-evolved" or "hateful."

As the winter chill bit into Jerusalem, Navon decided that the foxes, as the architects of the revolution, required more "administrative energy." He moved his closest fox kin into the heated birdhouse, feasting on the surplus grain while the elephants shivered in the yard. When a fox lieutenant brought him a choice cut of meat, Navon didn't ask where it came from; he simply told himself he earned it for the burden of leadership.

In the aftermath, the humans returned, finding the animals exhausted and broken by their own civil war. One by one, they were led back to their enclosures. Navon found himself in a small, cold cage, the keys gone forever. Across the way, Sela the crocodile watched him through the bars. The "Utopia" was a ruin of limestone and broken laws, and the only thing left of the dream was the cold iron between them.